

## *Susan Margaret Collins*

*1952–*

UNITED STATES SENATOR

REPUBLICAN FROM MAINE

*1997–*



Image courtesy of the Member

**A LONG-TIME CONGRESSIONAL AIDE AND ADMINISTRATOR**, Susan Collins won election to the Maine U.S. Senate seat once held by her political idol, Margaret Chase Smith. Senator Collins has developed a reputation as a fiscal conservative whose moderate views on health care, education, and election reform make her one of the chamber's most independent Members. In 2003, Senator Collins became one of just five women in Senate history to chair a full committee when she was named head of the Governmental Affairs Committee (later renamed Homeland Security and Government Affairs).

Susan Margaret Collins was born on December 7, 1952, in Caribou, Maine, one of six children raised by Don and Patricia Collins. After earning a B.A. in government from St. Lawrence University in 1975, Collins served as an aide to Maine Representative Bill Cohen; she followed him when Cohen won election to the U.S. Senate in 1978. In 1981, Collins became staff director of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management. Six years later Maine's Republican Governor John McKernan, Jr., appointed Collins commissioner of the state department of professional and financial regulation. From 1992 to 1993, Collins served as director of the New England Office of Small Business Administration. In 1994, Collins was the unsuccessful GOP candidate for governor of Maine. She later served as executive director of the Center for Family Business at Husson College.<sup>1</sup>

When her mentor William Cohen left the Senate to serve as President William J. Clinton's Secretary of Defense in 1996, Collins won the three-way Republican primary to succeed him. In the general election she faced former Maine Governor Joseph Brennan. Collins ran as a fiscal conservative who supported a balanced budget amendment, and proposed reducing estate taxes to help families keep small businesses intact from one generation to the next. At the polls, Collins prevailed with 49 percent of the vote.<sup>2</sup>

As a new Member of the 105th Congress (1997–1999), Senator Collins received assignments on three committees: Governmental Affairs, Labor and Human Resources (later renamed Health, Education, Labor and Pensions), and the Special Committee on Aging. On Governmental Affairs she became the first freshman to chair the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, focusing on consumer issues. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), she was named to the Special Committee on the Year 2000 Technology Problems. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Collins left the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee to serve on the Armed Services Committee in 2001. In 2003, Collins also received an assignment on the Joint Economic Committee.

Senator Collins has specialized in education and health care legislation, earning a reputation as an independent legislator. As a member of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Senator Collins co-authored the 1998 Higher Education Act which reauthorized federal education programs through 2003 and expanded government aid to college students. Collins added two amendments which allowed working students to earn more money before losing eligibility for federal tuition aid and increased aid for lower income students. Teaming up with Illinois Senator Richard Durbin, Collins wrote successful legislation which repealed a \$50 billion tax break for tobacco companies. Collins also was an ardent supporter of campaign finance reform, supporting the McCain–Feingold measure from its inception.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps her most notable accomplishment during her first term was to provide a compromise plan in late 1998 to end an impasse over how the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton would proceed in the Senate. Collins suggested to then-Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi that the Senate adopt “findings of fact” which detailed Clinton’s misconduct, prior to the vote on the two articles of impeachment. Not convinced that the President had committed impeachable offenses, she nonetheless noted, “A lot of us are concerned about the message a straight acquittal would send to the White House and to the American people.”<sup>4</sup> Though Collins helped craft the procedural settlement that laid the groundwork for the impeachment process, she and a small minority of Republicans eventually voted with Democrats to acquit Clinton on the two articles of impeachment.

In 2002, Collins won re-election with 59 percent of the vote against Democrat Chellie Pingree, the Maine state senate majority leader. When the 108th Congress (2003–2005) convened, Collins became chair of the Governmental Affairs Committee. From that post she co-authored and helped shepherd through the Senate an intelligence agency reform bill that incorporated many of the suggestions put forward by the 9/11 *Commission Report* in 2004, which represents the most sweeping changes to the U.S. intelligence community in more than 50 years.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Susan Margaret Collins,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

Mikulski, Barbara, et al. *Nine and Counting: The Women of the Senate*. (New York: Morrow, 2000).

## NOTES

1 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 442–443; *Almanac of American Politics*, 1998 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc, 1997): 697–698.

2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.

3 *Politics in America*, 2002: 442–443; Michael Winerip, “Susan M. Collins: A Moderate’s Moment,” 20 July 1997, *New York Times Magazine*: 18.

4 Lorraine Adams, “A Freshman With an Endgame Idea; As Unassuming Advocate, Collins Hopes ‘Findings of Fact’ Will Send Message,” 29 January 1999, *Washington Post*: A1.